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ABSTRACT

Evaluation strategies used in a 1979 assessment study of information services in Oregon are described. The study was designed to assist staff and members of the Oregon Educational Coordinating Commission with a policy decision. A multi-form, multi-method and multiple audience assessment strategy was used in an effort to account for both the technical and the political dimensions of analysis. The assessment featured in-mail surveys, interviews, extensive use of secondary sources of data, identification of environmental factors that might affect future educational information and counseling service development in Oregon, a specification of study limitations, and a final working conference where preliminary assessment findings were reviewed and debated. The needs assessment considered the adequacy of educational information and counseling services in the state in order to help in the decision of whether to apply for federal funds under the Educational Information Centers Program. It was concluded that information services were not adequate. (Author/SW)

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INTEGRATING THE TECHNICAL AND THE POLITICAL: THE CASE OF AN ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE ADEQUACY IN OREGON

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This paper was presented at the Twentieth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, April 27 - May 1, 1980. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

Mary Corcoran
University of Minnesota
(Editor, AIR Forum Publications)

ABSTRACT

Too often policy-makers are confronted with results from evaluation studies which prove of little use in policy deliberations. The purpose of this paper is to share information about several evaluation strategies used in a 1979 assessment study in Oregon designed to assist staff and members of the Oregon Educational Coordinating Commission(OECC) with a particular policy decision.

A multi-form, multi-method and multiple audience assessment strategy was used in an effort to account for both the technical and the political dimensions of the study. The assessment featured: in-mail surveys; interviews; extensive use of secondary sources of data; identification of important environmental factors which might affect future educational information and counseling service development in Oregon; a specification of study limitations; and a final working conference where preliminary assessment findings were reviewed and debated.

The author concludes that evaluation studies by definition must often risk a certain degree of "messiness" if eventual use is to be maximized. She argues that the vision of the evaluator in an uncluttered setting where everything is neatly quantifiable is archaic, if it ever worked. A deliberate and careful integration of the technical and the political are said to make the difference between a useful and a relatively useless evaluation product.

Data data data; I've got data all around.
I've got data in my hair.
I've got data on the ground.
But I ain't got...I ain't got no information.

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Song lyric to "Data Data Data"

While not grammatically correct, the sentiment expressed above captures the too often heard lament of policy-makers when confronted with results of an evaluation study. Charts and Tables may proliferate, and the study may even make for interesting reading; too often, however, it fails to inform and more frequently, fails to provide information useful to decision-making.

The purpose of this paper is to share information about several evaluation strategies used in a 1979 assessment study in Oregon(Kinnick, 1979) designed to assist staff and members of the Oregon Educational Coordinating Commission(OECC) with a particular policy decision. As is usually the case, time was short, staff and other resources limited, and the political climate murky. Despite several important study design limitations, however, results did play a significant role in the policy deliberation process. The evaluation(in this case, a needs assessment) design, methods used and reporting strategies should be of particular interest to those members of the institutional research community concerned with maximizing the impact of evaluation studies on decision-making.

The Situation and Study Focus

The Educational Information Centers Program(EIC) was authorized by Title IV of the Education Amendments of 1976(P.L. 94-482). June 30, 1978 regulations(see Federal Register, vol.43, no.127) specified that these Centers were to make educational information, guidance, counseling,

and referral services accessible to all residents of the state. States could apply for planning and/or implementation funds(about $50,000 per state) for the first year, 1978-79. Oregon elected to apply for and received dollars to support a statewide assessment of the need for any new, improved or otherwise altered educational information and counseling services.

Early discussions with OECC staff members made clear the assessment study was expected to address two major questions: Should federal funds (which required a substantial state match) be sought in the future to support Educational Information Center program development in Oregon? and If so, how should the funds be used? The study timeframe was six months. Staff included one full-time director, several part-time professional consultants, and a computer programmer.

Views held about Educational Information Centers were found to be quite mixed among various segments of the postsecondary education community. Some felt Oregon's extensive community college system was already meeting all of the statewide EIC-related needs. Some feared the growth of yet another duplicative bureaucracy. Others felt that too much public exposure of EIC's would only increase public demand for more services which, in the end, the state would be asked and refuse to pay for. Still others strongly felt that while state and local communities should foot the bill for information and counseling services for in-school youth, adults should fend for themselves. The study began with seemingly few proponents of EIC in Oregon.

Assessment staff concluded that at minimum the study must be designed to answer the following question: What might be the consequences of doing nothing(e.g. not applying for future funding, which was guaranteed)? Assessment staff recognized that for funding to be sought, a very strong case of service inadequacy would have to be made.

The Criteria Challenge

Prior to conducting the assessment, no criteria existed for use in both measuring and judging the adequacy of current service delivery. Federal EIC regulations as well as state educational "goal" documents were examined and a set of criteria developed and reviewed by OECC staff. The credible reception and full consideration of assessment findings were anticipated to be highly contingent on the general acceptability of the criteria developed. Nine basic criteria were used to assess current service adequacy and are shown in Figure 1. A variety of assessment strategies were then selected to collect information relevant to each of the criteria.

Assessment Strategy: Integrating Numbers and Politics

A multi-form, multi-method and multiple audience assessment strategy was used in an effort to account for both the technical and the political dimensions of the study. A paper by the League of California Cities(1975, p.13) makes the observation that:

> Social needs assessment is, in the final analysis, a political art. It requires political sensitivity as well as technical expertise.

Figure 2 provides an overview of assessment strategy components.

Specific inquiry methods were selected which could provide information about the quantity, quality and location of current educational information and counseling services available to various sub-populations in the state. In addition to searching for measures and indicators of service "adequacy" related to the key criteria, an effort was made to produce baseline data for future use in monitoring change in service delivery activity in the state. A brief summary of the specific assessment strategies used may be found in Figure 3.

Too often, assessment studies fail to make sufficient use of data that

Figure 1

Criteria Used to Assess Service Adequacy

1. Educational and career information services are designed to enhance informed choice among learning and career options.

2. Guidance services consider client needs and interests as primary; and information content is impartial and unbiased.

3. Educational information services are equally available to all Oregonians regardless of geographic residence, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, or handicap.

4. A similar quality of educational information services are available to all current and prospective service clients.

5. Educational information services are designed to enhance the information-seeking and information-processing skills of clients.

6. Printed information content is accurate and readable.

7. Educational information services are delivered with a minimum of unnecessary duplication and a maximum of coordination and cooperation.

8. Educational information service users report positive impact from the use of such services.

9. Educational information service providers use on-going evaluation processes to improve their service programs.

Figure 2

Information Collection Strategies and Products

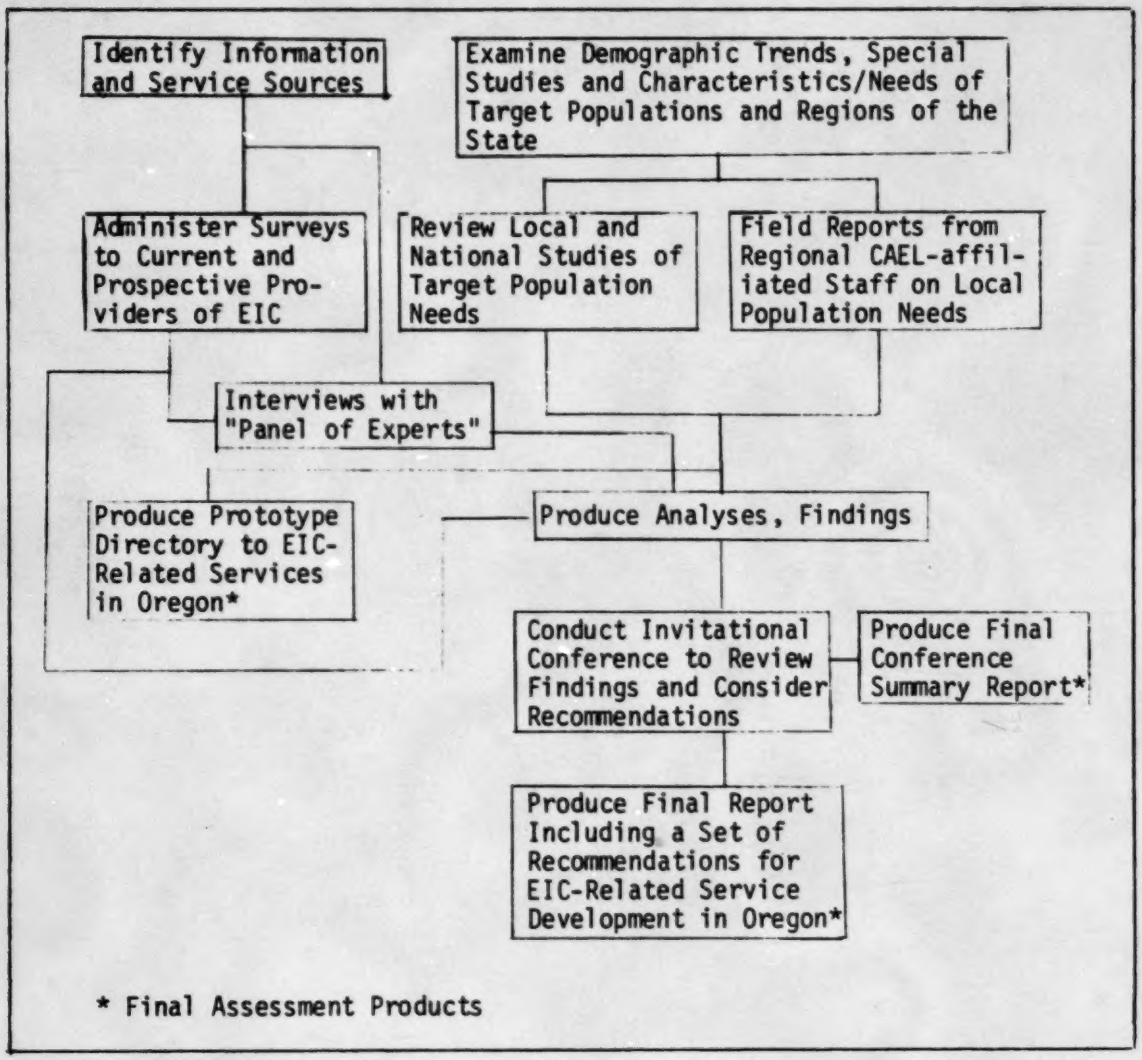
Identify Information and Service Sources
Examine Demographic Trends, Special Studies and Characteristics/Needs of Target Populations and Regions of the State
Administer Surveys to Current and Prospective Providers of EIC
Review Local and National Studies of Target Population Needs
Field Reports from Regional CAEL-affiliated Staff on Local Population Needs
Interviews with "Panel of Experts"
Produce Prototype Directory to EIC-Related Services in Oregon*
Produce Analyses, Findings
Conduct Invitational Conference to Review Findings and Consider Recommendations
Produce Final Conference Summary Report*
Produce Final Report Including a Set of Recommendations for EIC-Related Service Development in Oregon*
* Final Assessment Products

Figure 3

Assessment Strategies

Multi-Methods

1. extensive secondary literature review of previous state and national studies
2. compilation of state demographic and social indicator data
3. content review of printed information about educational/training opportunities, financial aid and costs, etc. made available to prospective students by postsecondary education institutions
4. design and administration of in-mail surveys for use by service providers(postsecondary education institutions, high school counselors, school and public librarians, social service and community-based organizations/agencies, and employers)
5. compilation of a prototype educational information and counseling services directory showing, by county, the kind and extent of services offered by different agencies
6. individual and small group interviews with key service providers and service program administrators
7. identification of major environmental factors which could affect EIC-related future developments

Multi-Forms

use of five different in-mail surveys which included both common and unique items

Multiple Audiences

1. direct EIC-related service providers
2. service staff who work with particular sub-populations but who currently offer little EIC-related service
3. service program administrators
4. individual clients via review of numerous other studies of consumer needs
5. advocates for particular consumer groups

already exists as well as findings from previous studies. Instead, the more common approach is to design yet another survey or interview schedule (acting as if others did not exist), sample some populations, and administer the instrument. Wheels are reinvented everyday. Extensive use was made in this assessment of secondary data sources. The surveys, interviews, and content review strategies were designed to collect new information. The interviews provided more information about and enhanced sensitivity to sources of disagreement among agency representatives about the adequacy of current services. Sensitivity to the political climate was essential when final recommendations were prepared.

The failure to account for, in a direct way, the current satisfaction with services among Oregonian consumers proved to be somewhat of a liability. Despite the fact that a large number of other states had surveyed consumers about their educational/career information and counseling needs and reported very similar findings(see Cross in Peterson, 1979), some assessment study reviewers persisted in arguing that the situation might well be different in Oregon. (As a now adopted Oregonian, the author must confess to a growing conviction that indeed we Oregonians are different!) The lack of Oregon-specific data about consumer satisfaction with current services was felt by a few reviewers to weaken overall study impact.

While lack of this information did weaken the credibility of some study findings, overall the technical rigor of the study remained intact. As institutional researchers know, however, technical rigor and use of commendable research procedures do not automatically result in a product which has impact. It is critical to remain sensitive to the fact that the sources from which information is collected are themselves differentially valued.

In drafting the final report section on assessment objectives and

methods, considerable attention was given to detailing study limitations. OECC staff reviewers stated this particular section was well received and is usually not included in such reports. By highlighting the limitations, various potential sources of criticism of the study were anticipated and, to a great extent, diffused. A statement of limitations also allowed the reader to know what degree of confidence could be placed in the various findings and to review a set of issues for which further assessment studies were needed. Little could be said, for instance, about patterns of post-secondary education participation by different age and racial groups due to inconsistent, inadequate and inaccurate institutional, state and federal data collection and reporting practices.

Finally, a special chapter in the final report was devoted exclusively to a review of environmental factors which were identified and then considered during the review of service adequacy and in the formulation of recommendations for further EIC-related development in Oregon. The viability of final recommendations was considerably enhanced by an accounting of the various economic, social and political factors listed in Figure 4.

Analysis: A Legal Brief Approach

The multiple sources of information collected were reviewed in light of the "service adequacy" criteria outlined earlier in this paper. The analysis process was both highly systematic and "gestalt"-like. Information from all data sources, the qualitative and quantitative, was reviewed for consistencies and discrepancies across the study methods.

Various conclusions which seemed suggested from an initial review of the findings were formulated. The data was then re-examined systematically for evidence which either supported or did not support the initial conclusions. Some initial conclusions were eventually discarded and others altered to better fit with the nature and extent of evidence which emerged. Par-

Figure 4

Environmental Factors and EIC-Related Impacts

Factors	EIC-Related Impacts
1. energy costs, lower availability	access to EIC must be less dependent on the car; explore home delivery sites and other sites close to home or work
2. rapid developments in the telecommunications field	potential of increased affordability of home and/or work-site based service access
3. increased competition for students among institutions	potential for deterioration in quality of information made available by institutions to prospective students; more incentive to "sell" and less to "inform"
4. breakdown of lock-step of school, work, leasure	increase service access so individuals can make use of them when they feel the need
5. continued population growth in Oregon; increase, through in-migration, of both those with a high level of formal education and those without	increasing demand as well as need for education/training many newcomers less familiar with in-place service networks; need for more outreach
6. in the future, expectation that there will be fewer jobs with career potential; rapid increase in job-market entry by women	increase in interest in moving laterally in the job structure; greater interest in transferability of current skills
7. increase in inflation rates, impending recession	less value placed on education relative to other goods and services unless direct economic pay-off for more schooling shown
8. ballot box rejection of more government spending	little hope for new dollars to support EIC; support must come from current resources
9. public support for decentralization of program and service administration	increase in demand for local control of service development and operation

ticipants at a concluding working conference also reviewed preliminary findings and conclusions and offered extensive comment. Their input was reviewed and played a role in the revision of some conclusions.

This approach to the analysis allowed for a review of the multiple sources of information used in the study with a focus on a particular contention(e.g. a statement of conclusion) about the nature of current EIC-related service in Oregon. An alternate approach often used in these kinds of studies is to review separately a myriad of findings from each of the different assessment methods used(e.g. survey results; interview results; etc.). The result is a highly fragmented report of findings which may or may not seem to relate directly to the fundamental issue(s) the study was to address. The "legal-brief" analysis and reporting approach used in this assessment required an integration of findings. Fourteen major conclusions were presented, along with supportive evidence and arguments.

Developing Final Recommendations: A Political and Technical Process

The study concluded that indeed current EIC-related services were not adequate and described the ways in which current services were inadequate. It further argued that there was strong evidence to suggest that doing nothing to improve services was likely to contribute to an increase in current social and economic inequities among various sub-groups in the population.

Two special strategies were used to develop final recommendations to the OECC. First, assessment study staff reviewed the upcoming activity plans of several major service providers already operating in the state, including the Oregon Occupational Information Coordinating Committee, the State Library, the Oregon Department of Education, the Oregon State System of Higher Education, Statewide CETA and several primes, the State Scholarship Commission, and the Consortium for the Advancement of Experiential and

Lifelong Learning.

Second, a working conference was conducted to which representatives of the OECC staff, major service providers and consumer advocates were invited(Franklin, 1979). Thirty-seven persons attended the two-day conference which was organized to achieve the following: to provide an opportunity for debate on the relevance and significance of major assessment findings; to corroborate study staffs' conclusion that there were considerable gaps in current service adequacy; and to provide a forum for additional reflection on what should be recommended for the future. The extent of concurrence on each of the preliminary findings and conclusions of the study was solicited and later reviewed as the final report was prepared. Participants discussed and debated a series of alternative EIC program plans and structures given an assumption of a known amount of federal dollar availability. By-products of the conference were the identification of ways in which current service providers were willing to commit their agencies to cooperative EIC-related activity in the future and the increase in awareness among those attending of what other agencies do.

The working conference not only resulted in a technically improved final assessment report, but greatly enhanced its credibility. Also, the alternative recommendations proposed in the final report were not "pie in the sky" ideas but reflected both the assessment findings and current political and economic realities in the state.

Final Reporting

An Executive Summary of the assessment findings was considered an essential supplement to the final report. A detailed summary of the interactions during and the results from the working conference was also prepared. After the OECC staff and members had reviewed the assessment docu-

ments, assessment staff gave a summary oral presentation of the findings to the full Commission. A special oral presentation of the findings, however, was not given to OECC staff members but should have been. Several problematic issues arose after release of the study which could have been easily cleared up had an oral presentation taken place.

A Final Comment

Evaluation studies oftentimes by definition must risk some degree of "messiness" if their eventual use is to be maximized. The vision of the evaluator locked away in a laboratory, reviewing computer printouts, constructing Tables, and keeping everything neat and tidy is simply archaic (if it ever worked). A deliberate and careful integration of the technical and the political(with some artistry thrown in for good measure) in the construction of evaluation designs can mean the difference between products which make or do not make a difference. Most of us would prefer to make a difference.

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